

"Ho-ho!" Don Tostado roared. "There is then no sweetheart who geevs ribbons and would dispute for the favor of the lady."



# The Blue Ribbon

Illustrated by  
Charles Sarka

By GERALD BEAUMONT

*Mr. Beaumont awoke to find himself famous for his Red Book stories last year; this new tale of roses and gunpowder, of swift love and hot hate, again justifies your enthusiasm.*

MADAM DOUBLE-CHIN will tell you that much depends upon a hair-ribbon. The Madam is not respectable, but she is very wise. If you ever go to Mexacana (and for the good of your soul keep away!) you will probably meet Madam Double-chin. She is to be found either behind the cash-register in the Mexacana Café or back of her desk at the Inn which is next door. Her form is portly and perfumed; her hair is henna-ed; and whether you are fifteen or fifty, she smiles as you pay your check, and murmurs:

"Thank you, dearie."

From her you may learn what hour mass is said at San Miguel; or if your mood runs along other lines, she will write you a passport to the Devil's Garden, which is but a block distant. She aims to please.

When one is fifty, hair-ribbons are no longer proper—"no es costumbre," as the Mexicans put it. Therefore, Madam Double-

chin's hands are heavy with diamonds, because of which some day she will very probably be killed. This she understands, but then there is a risk to everything at Mexacana, where authority speaks through a phonograph, and the class of music depends upon the one who has bought the records. The Madam sleeps behind barred doors. At other times, there is always within calling distance the figure of Little Bill, who with his automatic can hit a tin can across the street ten times while you are drawing your breath.

Time was, when little Dolores sang *canciones de amor* at the Purple Pigeon, and Mike Morwych sat in a corner of the Palace spinning the web of the Devil's Spider, and Johnny Powell ran the dice-game at Brayfield's. That was when José Maria Lopez Tostado—referred to in certain quarters as "Señor Sap"—came up from the West Coast to squander much gold, imbibe much whisky and emulate the exploits of Don Juan.

Now little Dolores is gone; so are Señor Sap, the Spider and



Johnny Powell. Madam Double-chin remains, and the story is this:

Where the lights are brightest, there the weak moths flutter and are mangled. Mexacana received the border drainage of two countries, and is one of the last refuges of His Satanic Majesty. Hang-town, Whisky Hill and Dead Man's Gulch are but memories; the Wild West is gone, never to return. But at Mexacana—there Venus, Bacchus and Fortuna still rule in the time-old trinity: the clink of silver dollars mingles with the blare of the trombone; girls with ribbons in their hair greet strangers with a—"Buy me a drink, honey," and the voice of the gamekeeper calls to his customers: "Come on, boys; a monkey can play it as well as a man!"

Underfoot there is mud—persistent and most besmirching mud; but overhead the sky is cerulean. At night stars and moon weave a mantle of turquoise, and the visitor becomes always sentimental and frequently drunk. Nationalities are as mixed as in hell itself. Reformers go there to study this last relic of iniquity. Tourists flock thither, later to regale respectable friends at home with accounts of things that never happened. Mexacana laughs and takes their money. Those who live there are wise in some things and very foolish in others; and their philosophy of life is akin to that expressed in "La Valentina"—the popular ditty which the peons chant when ordered out for another revolution.

You remember the refrain? Translated freely, it runs:

*If I must die tomorrow,  
I might as well die today.*

THERE are, of course, exceptions to all things. Even among moths, there are those who, by some saving grace, still flutter in apparent safety just beyond the dead-line. For them Destiny is an interrogation-point, to be settled by a roll of the dice, or—as Madam Double-chin will tell you—by a lady's hair-ribbon. Among the moths of Mexacana then were Johnny Powell and Dolores Romero.

A pale face, a silk shirt, a pistol eye: that was Johnny. He was an ivory-turner, which is a profession that began with Palamedes during the siege of Troy and has boasted such artisans as Julius Cæsar, King Richard and Lord Fitzgerald, none of whom knew as much about the business as Johnny Powell.

"Dice have their laws," says St. Ambrose, "which the courts of justice cannot undo." Johnny knew these laws—every one of the sixty-four; and it was his business to see that no one broke them—at least not at his table, where the natural house-percentage totaled ten thousand a year. According to his own lights, Johnny was, on the "up and up." Never in all his life had he cheated a man or wronged a woman, and from his own viewpoint he was not a gambler. Those who stood in front of his layout did the gambling. Johnny merely reaped the mathematical percentage of the Ivory God; in return for this he ran the game, performing mental miracles as he paid off—and preserving law and order with a smile and an automatic. Some day, if he lived, Johnny would go down to the West Coast, hang a hammock under a mango tree on his own *ranchita*, and never touch dice again. The blue eyes that looked out of Johnny's pale face were very tired, though he had seen but twenty-four summers.

Sometimes, when the take-in had been particularly large, Johnny dined at the Purple Pigeon, which professed respectability, selling nothing that was not on the bill of fare, and then only at prices which none but the elect could afford. Here the entertainment was first-class. For example: there was Billy Nicholls, who would make the saxophone laugh or weep in nine languages; La Belle Hélène, the whirlwind dancer who was Billy's wife; and there was, also, Señorita Dolores Romero, "The Border Nightingale," who was a rare little moth indeed.

If you are familiar with the *favoritas* of the high-class music halls in Latin America, you will know there are but two types: the self-assured, electric Carmens of the stamping heels and castanets; and the demure, deep-tinted *chiquitas* with the grace of fawns, and faces like the Madonna. Combine the two types, and you have the girl who was singing *canciones de amor* at the Purple Pigeon.

When the lights were lowered a trifle and Dolores sang "The Dove's Lullaby," sauntering between the tables with that gliding walk which rivals the grace of the swimmer, Johnny Powell used to take two lumps of sugar, mark them dreamily with his pencil, and roll them on the tablecloth. But they had not yet come up the right way, and so he held his peace until they should. Meanwhile some one else used to lean in the doorway, listening to Dolores, and pursing his thick lips thoughtfully.

It is impossible to describe Mike Morwych. But if you are a mother and have an innocent daughter, sometime in a nightmare

you may be unfortunate enough to behold a great barroom filled with men and girls. The latter wear short dresses and bright red ribbons in their hair. Every little while, a man, who is usually drunk, and a girl who is laughing wildly, go through a back door into what is called the Devil's Garden.

Presently they return and buy more drinks. Still later the night's receipts find their way to a huge safe in the corner of the room where sits a corpulent and blinking spider, chewing a black cigar, and watching with beady eyes the moths that flutter at the edge of his web. The Spider is Mike Morwych.

Morwych owned the Palace, a fact which everyone understood; but he was also the real proprietor of the Purple Pigeon, and this was something that Johnny Powell didn't know and little Dolores had found out to her sorrow.

(May you awaken from the nightmare and hurry to your daughter's room to assure yourself that she is still there!)

"Bueno!" Up from his oil-lands on the West Coast came Don Tostado to earn the sobriquet of "Señor Sap" because of the ease with which he was plucked.

"What I care?" said the Señor. "I am a ver' gran' *caballero* I lose more dam' money, and ween more dam' women than anybody else—tha's me! *Vamos*—I buy one dreenk!"

The Señor was short and fat and fifty. His black mustachios curled up at either end, and he perspired freely. His conquests of the heart at Mexacana were far too easy. He yearned for a señorita who would inspire all his talents. Thus it was that he first heard of, and then beheld, the Border Nightingale singing in the Purple Pigeon. One pudgy hand went to his bosom, and his eyes rolled.

"Ah, *Dios*," he cried, "*que niña tan bonita!* At last have I found the one dream of my life. Hither, leetle one—you shall at the same table sit with Don Tostado, and we will talk—no? Maybe I buy thees place, and you too! Maybe I geev you thees diamon' from off my hand. Who can tell what I—a gran' *caballero*—do for his leetle *amiga*. Come!"

When one is an entertainer, even at the Purple Pigeon, certain things are incumbent. Dutifully, Señorita Romero smiled upon her host, and fed the little man's vanity, striving all the while to play the game as squarely and skillfully as though she were Johnny Powell behind his layout at Brayfield's; for she too sought only a legitimate percentage. But alas, this was a more difficult game.

"*Nombre de Dios!*" vowed the Señor. "Never have I beheld such eyes, such lips! Look you, leetle one, did I say that I have own t'ree t'ousand acre of oil, and am the *amigo* of the Jefe Politico? Ho-ho! I see in your eyes that now you comprehend. *Bueno!* In one, two, t'ree day I leave, and I take you wiz me—most assuredly."

"Oh, but I could not," laughed Dolores. "Already I have a *querido*—"

"Bah! You have a sweetheart, and yet you wear no diamonds—not a ring! He is a poor lover. What he geev you, eh?"

Señorita Romero bit her lips nervously.

"*Mi querido* is not rich," she acknowledged. "So I do not ask for diamonds. But always he bring me a ribbon for my hair, and with his own fingers does he tie the bow. See, is it not *beau-tiful*?"

She turned her small head, better to display the gay ribbon affixed to her braids.

"Ah, *Dios!*" she continued. "How he loves me, and how ver-ee jealous, he is! You are kind, señor; but truly—he may even now be watching, and he is mos' quick with the *pistola*. You must excuse me—"

MANY times little Dolores had saved herself by that whitest of lies; but Don Tostado was a very great gentleman, indeed. One puffy hand pulled the Border Nightingale back to her chair. His little black eyes grew red. The silverware clattered under the bang of a fist.

"Am I a peasant?" he roared. "No! Ten t'ousand *pesos* I lose in Brayfield; twenty t'ousand more I have spend with Señor Morwych. One word to my friend, the chief of police, and Mexacana—she close up! But I weel not say the word. Instead, I geev one *baile* on the night of the tomorrow—*caramba*, yes! You know why—leetle dove? Because, after we have dance' all night, you shall of your own accord go way weeth me."

Dolores quivered like a bird under the spell of a serpent. Some one apprised Morwych of what was going on, and he came hurrying in. He took in the situation at a glance, eased himself into a chair by the side of the Border Nightingale, and sent for more drinks. No one could spin a quicker or more artful fabric in less





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time than the Mexicana Spider. Señorita Romero's frail excuses were brushed aside, and in their place Morwych wove a web of his own fashioning. Don Tostado's mood changed to one of merriment.

"Ho-ho-ho," he roared. "So, it ees what the Americanos call only a 'stall,' eh? There is then no sweetheart who geevs ribbons and would dispute weeth Don Tostado for the favor of the lady he have select? *Bueno!* That ees ver' good. Señor Morwych, I hold the *danza* in your place, and I pay for everyting. Now, I must go San Rey for sell fifteen t'ousand barrels oil. But when I come back—we have gran' times! *Adios, amigo!* —Flower of my heart, I say the sweet good night!"

"That you may pass it well, señor." Dolores spoke in her native tongue, small head lowered to hide the torture in her eyes. Under the table, one wrist was being slowly turned in the grip of Morwych.

The Señor waddled from the room. The Spider released his clutch.

"Nice work, kid," he complimented. "Now I'm going to tell you somethin,' and I aint going to say it with flowers. . . . I know these greasers like a book. Flatter 'em, and it's like shaking money out of the baby's bank. Cross 'em, and it's—good night! He's

good for fifty thousand more if he's kidded along; otherwise—well, the Jefe Politico is into him already for a sweet fortune, and you know what that means. Tostado owns the town. Be a sensible kid; and when you come back from your vacation with Señor Sap, I'll show you how to make some real dough."

The Border Nightingale toyed with her fan.

"Mexicana—it is a ver' bad place," she mused. "It should close, señor. Rather than do what is in your mind, little Dolores—she kills herself."

Morwych rolled the black cigar thoughtfully between his lips.

The orchestra struck the opening bars of "La Valentina," and Dolores glanced at her wrist-watch. It was time for her to resume her professional rôle of the Border Nightingale. She arose mechanically.

"Never mind," said Morwych. "You don't sing around here until we've reached a better understanding. Take a coupla drinks, and think it over."

He got up, nodded carelessly, and went out to see what new moths had fallen into his net at the Palace. Señorita Romero sank into her chair, eyes on her untouched glass of wine.

At that moment the Ivory God rewarded the patience of Johnny Powell, sitting alone in one corner of the room, and rolling little



"Go 'way, leetle mens,  
go 'way. I am ver' gran  
caballero. Dios, yes! All  
by myself I desire to  
have my revenge."

sugar-lumps across the table. He looked up to see the Border Nightingale sitting silent and alone. As if reading his thoughts, the little singer turned her head, and regarded the young American wistfully. He grinned and pointed to the vacant chair opposite him. In a moment she had fluttered, wide-eyed, to his table.

"Amigo mio, was it an angel of God who bade you not to leave me alone?"

"An angel?" said Johnny. "In Mexicana? Sister, there's only one angel here, and I can't figure out why she's hangin' around. I get my tips from the dice."

"Dice?" Her quick eyes searched the table, and beheld the sugar-lumps. Before he could guard them, one small hand took quick possession. On the upturned face of each cube there was a penciled heart. Johnny Powell was caught with marked dice. He grew very red.

"Just kiddin' myself," he explained. "Wanted to talk to you, but didn't know whether you cared for home talent. I run the game at Brayfield's. Been shooting sugar-lumps six nights now, and this is the first time I threw the double house sign."

Señorita Romero veiled her eyes under long lashes, and spoke with difficulty because of the beating of her heart.

"Thou art Señor John-nay Pow-ell," she pronounced, "—who have never wrong a woman, and who have kill men who cheat. They say that the *pobrecitas*—the poor little ones at the Palacio—those who wear the red ribbons—they get the money from you to go home when no one else will give. You see, I know much."

"You sure do," admitted Johnny. "I'm a bad *muchacho*, but I guess I aint what you would call rotten. Who's been talking to you?"

"Madam Double-chin. I live at her house."

The face of young Brayfield's gamekeeper hardened.

"What?"

"Nay, but thou must not look at me like that. Ah, *Dios*, please! She does for each only what is asked of her. To me she have been a mother, and have give me the room that is next to hers. With her own hands one night, did she almost strangle the man who would have—"

She shuddered and concluded: "*Amigo*, I wish that I was brave, and could use the *pistola* too, *Dios*, yes!"



The jazz orchestra blared into a fox-trot, and the floor resounded to the *pit-pat* of shoe and slipper. Johnny Powell looked at the Border Nightingale.

"Want to take a chance?"

"With you, Señor? Ah, so gladly!"

She floated into his arms, and for a few precious moments forgot everything else in the realization of a dream that she had often conjured.

Hitherto he had been a distant Sir Galahad, the one maiden knight of Mexicana, whose phantom she had summoned to her aid in the name of womanhood. Now she was actually in the shelter of his arms, and he had called her to his side because of sugar-lumps that showed a pair of hearts. The wonder of it all was still in her eyes as they returned to their table. As for Johnny—he was young, and she was very pretty.





"I have an aunt," she told him shyly, "an aunt who have one time love an Americano. He was an engineer, and verree brave and handsome. But he was kill', and so all her life Tia Christina was verree sad, like me."

Johnny looked incredulous.

"Nay," she told him, "I speak truly. The Romero's have once owned all San Rey, but with the revolutions, it go until there was nothing but my voice to keep my father and mother alive. So for them I sing at Mexacana where there is money and I am near home. Now they are dead, and Dolores is alone. A little while now—and the Border Nightingale is no more. The name itself means 'Sad One,' señor. May I keep thy lumps of *azucar*?"

Johnny Powell studied the girl in front of him. Brayfield himself used to say about his young gamekeeper that the man did not live who could stand at Johnny's table for five minutes without

having been classified correctly.

"Girl," said Johnny, "you seem to be in trouble, and I'd like to help. Fact is, I've been kidding myself along with a nutty sort of hunch, and you're the great big part of it. See what's on them sugar dice? Well, that's the way I play the game with a woman. The house wins on a pair of hearts or not at all."

Señorita Romero beat her small hands softly together, and he saw that they were innocent of adornment.

"I was thinking of riding across the border tomorrow on business," he ventured. "I'd like to bring a little souvenir. Maybe a ring would bring you luck—or is that rushing things?"

The blood flamed into the cheeks of the Border Nightingale. She lowered her eyes, and was silent a moment.

"Thou art not rich," she said softly, "and so diamonds I do not ask for. But *ah, amigo*—if thou would bring me a ribbon for my hair!"

It was Johnny Powell's turn to color a little. Madam Double-chin is right. A hair-ribbon is a most fundamental thing. Give a little girl a doll for her arms and a bow for her hair, and the two instincts of the sex are satisfied. And to a man, does not a bit of ribbon spell both sentiment and intimacy? It has ever been the *gage d'honneur*, the emblem of chivalry and knight-hood, the mark of my lady's favor—as simple and primitive a thing as the passion for gambling; and that, mark you, swayed our first parents as they sat under the original fig-tree playing "odd and even" with pebbles!

"Sure I'll bring you a ribbon," said Johnny. "I was prepared to get the town-hall clock if you'd

asked for it. What color would you like?"

Dolores studied the eyes of Sir Galahad.

"It must be a *blue* ribbon," she decided, "a most heavenly blue. For look you—it is also the color of the Virgin, who was most pure; and I assure thee, John-nay *mio*, little Dolores, she has the right to wear it. Dost thou believe?"

Johnny nodded his head to show that he both believed and *knew*.

"Leave it to me," he told her. "I'm the blue ribbon kid. Feel a little happier now, don't you?"

She nodded dumbly.

"Me too," said Johnny. "Now I have to get back on the job and swing a cane for a while. Nobody bothering you, is there?"

She shook her head. The safety of Johnny Powell had suddenly become very precious to the Border Nightingale.

"In that case," he told her, "I'll have (Continued on page 120)



"Are you angry?"

"No," she whispered.

They sat silent for some time. After a while he asked:

"Does this composer mean a great deal to you?"

"Yes," she said, "a very great deal."

He patted her hand, and sighed.

**B**ETWEEN fifty and sixty thousand people journeyed to Hope Park on the day of the Festival. The huge, natural amphitheater was a living mass before noon, and the surrounding hills were densely thronged.

In the valley was a level, grassy plateau, half encircled by a heavy growth of oak, maple and elm trees, affording at once a back-drop to the stage, and an exit for the performers. The river, coming from around the bend, was a silvery surprise in the sunlight.

The great orchestra of two hundred and fifty pieces was set to the right of the stage, the musicians themselves being hidden from the audience by a screening of foliage. At the back a huge sounding-shell had been built so that the music would not be wasted in perverse winds, and for the conductor a tall stand had been erected.

The Festival committeemen, their families and friends, the social élite of Westville, were gathered to view the pageant from a specially constructed grandstand, not too near, nor yet too far, from the stage. It was within a minute before two o'clock when Rita, accompanied by a short, fat man, arrived beneath the box she was to occupy with Mr. Stuart, and a party of his friends. She almost ran into Mr. Stuart, hurrying along from the other direction. He had just held his last conference with Mr. Barrett, and he was far from being a happy man. His face was marked with the strain of the great responsibility he felt to be his.

"Everything all right?" asked Rita.

"They are all ready to start, but the composer is not here. There was a special delegation at the train to meet him, but if he came in, he missed them, or they missed him. He's your composer; where is he?"

"He should be here by now," smiled Rita. "I want you to meet an old friend of mine from New York, Mr. Hertz."

The two men shook hands.

"The composer is Mr. Hertz's protégé," explained Rita.

"But he received his inspiration elsewhere," said Hertz.

They mounted the stairs leading to the box, and as they reached the topmost step, the leader of the orchestra was seen climbing to his stand. The crowd caught sight of him, and burst into a roar. It was a tall, lithe, smiling young man who very composedly turned to bow his acknowledgments before taking up his baton. For a moment he seemed to look straight into the eyes of Rita. Then he turned to the orchestra, raised his wand.

Rita, tingling to the roots of her hair, hardly realized that Mr. Stuart was gripping her arm, and struggling to speak. There were tears in her eyes as she turned to him.

"Norman," he whispered brokenly.

"Norman—my boy!"

"Norman—my husband," said Rita.

The pageant was on. A noble swell of melody swept from the orchestra in the valley, and flowed upward and over the hills, sounding a note of exultant triumph. It was music of transcendent beauty, but deep within its throbbing grandeur there lay a simple theme of simplicity and sweetness and faith and love.

"My son, my son!" Mr. Stuart kept repeating, bewildered. Then he gripped Rita's hand even closer in his.

"My daughter," he whispered.

## THE BLUE RIBBON

(Continued from page 43)

to win a little money for a *ranchita* with some mango trees." He went away, smiling happily, and leaving Señorita Romero contemplating the sugar-lumps.

Life moves swiftly at Mexacana. An hour later Dolores was whispering her sweet hopes to Madam Double-chin, and neither was aware that Brayfield's young gamekeeper had just killed a man, and was imprisoned in the *cuartel*. Truly, the dice are well named "the devil's teeth."

**N**INE times the house had lost, and there was twenty-two hundred dollars on the table. The law of averages was yielding to the reckless play of Pancho Gonzales, gunman from the Tres Pinos country. Back of an imperturbable mask, the mind of Johnny Powell analyzed swiftly the last nine throws, and recalled that Gonzales had first rolled the dice clear down the table, and they had been tossed back to him by a fat man with beady eyes, chewing nervously upon a black cigar.

"Just a minute, *amigo*," said Johnny Powell. "I feel a little superstitious. Try

your luck with these bones, and I'll relieve you of the others."

He reached into the case, and tossed out another pair of dice.

"*Por Dios, no!*" flared the man from Tres Pinos. "I keep the dice by which I ween! You think I cheat?"

Thirty men, packed around the long table, held their breath.

"I told you I was just superstitious," reminded Johnny. "The house has the right to change the dice at any time. Use that pair, or pick up your money."

Pancho Gonzales hesitated. Then, quick as the dart of a snake's head, he drew and fired. The shot went wild; and he did not live to get in another. There was a flash of blue from the other side of the table, a spurt of red—and the man from Tres Pinos went down, clutching vainly at the table. No one else stirred or spoke.

"All right," sighed Johnny Powell. "Pick up your money, boys, and get out. Don't you move, Morwych—I've got you covered. Everybody else, beat it!"

In a few minutes Brayfield's was cleared of its usual patrons. There remained only Johnny Powell and his fellow gamekeepers, the prostrate figure on the floor, and Mike Morwych.

Johnny walked up to the proprietor of the Palace, tore open the latter's coat, and reaching one hand into the left vest pocket, withdrew a pair of dice with the Brayfield house-mark. They were apparently identical with the ivory cubes that Pancho Gonzales had been using, but there was this difference: The dice on the table had the usual markings—the trey on the right and the four on the left when the ace was uppermost and the

deuce in front; but on the dice taken from Morwych's pocket, this order was reversed, and by that token Johnny knew his own dice. Cold blue eyes looked at Morwych.

"Don't you ever come in here again," warned Johnny. "Don't even walk on the same side of the street—understand? I should have seen it when you picked up my dice and threw yours to your partner, but I was thinking of something else. I shot in self-defense; but you, you yellow dog, you're getting away with a cold-blooded murder! Get out now before I drill you."

Morwych left without saying a word. A few minutes later, red-trousered soldiers showed up from the *cuartel*, and Johnny Powell surrendered. He had no misgivings. A Mexican's life counts for little on the border if the man who takes it is employed by Brayfield; and even though his employer was away, Johnny knew how things were managed. He slept peacefully on a couch in the *comandante's* office.

**E**ARLY in the morning Señorita Romero hurried to the *cuartel*. She was trembling so violently that when the prisoner appeared, she would have fallen if he had not caught her.

"There, there, sister," he comforted. "Why, what's the matter, honey? You're not worrying about me!"

"*Si, si*," she quavered. "Canst thou not understand? I have loved all along, and now thou art in danger. *Ay, Dios!*"

Johnny Powell waved one hand at the gold-braided bailiff, and that individual discreetly withdrew, thereby missing the sight of Brayfield's young gamekeeper bending his head to meet upturned lips.

### "The Owl"

He wanted to become an eagle, but owl he was destined to be. And then one day came his great chance. On such a theme McCready Huston has written a great story for an early issue.



"There," said Johnny, "that shows how I stand. Now you go on back home, honey—and tonight you'll have your blue ribbon. I'll be out before noon, and that'll give me time to get across the border and back. You wait at Madam Double-chin's, and when I get there, we'll talk things over. You aint stuck on Mexacana, are you?"

"John-nay mio, anywhere with thee would be heaven."

He grinned boyishly. "Girl—oh, girl! I'm going to call you on that; but run along, babe—the air's too cold for you in that light dress."

"Ay—ay!" she bantered. "But what dost thou know about dresses, amor mio? Never mind, thou wilt learn. I go to pray; but first—"

She raised on tiptoe for another kiss, and then departed unwillingly, with many backward glances and much waving of a small hand. Later in the day she returned and was told that Señor Powell was no longer there. So she went back to Madam Double-chin's and all that afternoon was busy with most delightful preparations. On the advice of Madam, Dolores chose a dress that was very simple—the whitest of billowy frocks and the smallest of slippers.

JOHNNY POWELL came riding back from San Ramón, gold fireflies dancing in the dusk, a new moon silvering the mesquite, and in his pocket a blue ribbon for the dark hair of the Border Nightingale. Ah—a hair-ribbon is such a magic emblem.

From out of the gathering darkness a rifle spoke sharply. The youth with the blue ribbons in his pocket threw up both hands, swayed in the saddle, and then slid slowly off—to sprawl in the road, face downward and inert.

A long minute passed, silent save for the restless stamping of the riderless horse. Then the chaparral at the roadside crackled, and there emerged, warily, a native *rurale*, rifle in hand. He walked cautiously toward the prostrate figure in the road, and bent over. A swarthy sandaled foot was not two inches from Johnny Powell's right hand. White fingers closed upon brown ankle, wrenched upward—and in another second the positions of the two men were reversed. A falling rifle exploded aimlessly, and the *rurale* looked up to see the moonlight playing on an automatic.

"Your aim was pretty good," said Johnny, "but not quite good enough. You cut the reins out of my hands. Now, what's the big idea?"

"Your pardon, señor; I make mistake. I was take you for some one else."

"Don't lie, *hombre*. You know that horse of mine. Who told you to pot me? Pronto—or I let you have it!"

The Mexican spread his hands in the familiar deprecating gesture of his countrymen.

"The word has go out that you have escape', señor. There is five hundred pesos on your head."

The young American digested this information slowly. Life is a complex game in Mexacana.

"Darned if I don't think you're telling the truth," he muttered. "Somebody's pulling trick-dice again. If you don't



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mind, *amigo*, we'll change horses and outfits, and you'll stay here for a while. The next man might shoot a little straighter."

He exchanged his own hat and coat for the jacket and sombrero of his captive, bound the man hand and foot, and picked up the latter's rifle.

"*Caballo?*" he inquired.

"*Alli, señor*," replied the other, nodding toward a clump of willow.

Johnny led his own horse in the direction indicated, picketed him in the place of the *rurale's* mount, and swung into the fresh saddle. Then he resumed his journey, to all outward appearances a *soldado* scouting in the moonlight for an escaped prisoner. He was not likely to be shot at in that uniform, but there was still a problem for his wits to solve: A gambler's hunch told him that the *rurale* had spoken the truth. For some reason, the *comandante* at the *cuartel* had readily granted him twelve hours' leave, and then proclaimed him a jail-breaker. It was the oldest of border tricks—this "killed while trying to escape." But why pull it on him? Who wanted his life that badly? Who was using loaded dice?

Across the mind of Brayfield's game-keeper floated a vision of a fat spider with beady eyes, chewing a black cigar, and tossing a pair of false cubes to a gunman from Tres Pinos. *Morwyck!* Just as plainly as if he had been present, Johnny Powell divined what had happened. A word to the Jefe Politico, a peremptory demand upon the frightened *comandante* who had lied to save his skin, then a wink and the rattle of cash from Morwyck.

Johnny Powell drew rein. Behind him lay the American border and safety; ahead blinked the lights of Mexacana, where at eleven o'clock Don Tostado's *baile* would open at Mike Morwyck's place. In Johnny's pocket was a blue ribbon for Dolores, and she was waiting for him at Madam Double-chin's.

"Well," he mused, "I've been following the dice all my life; I might as well follow 'em now. Double hearts is my point, boys, and I'm out to make it. Get your money down!"

He struck off in a brisk canter toward Mexacana.

DID we say that the dice were well named the devil's teeth? Madam Double-chin, her fat face pasty under the rouge, hurried into Dolores' room an hour later with the tidings she had just learned from Little Bill.

"Dearie," she panted, "sump'n awful's happened. I just hate to tell you. Johnny broke jail, and they grabbed him a little while ago at the office of the Jefe Politico. He put up an awful fight, but there was too many of 'em. They say

the fellow he shot last night was a cousin of the governor of sump'n. Little Bill thinks it's all off with Johnny. They'll put him against a wall before mornin'. Aint that *hell*, dearie?"

The Border Nightingale reeled against the door.

"*Madre de Dios!*" she wailed. "He did not escape! The *comandante* told me that he let my *querido* go. John-nay, John-nay *mio!* Where is he?"

"Aint I said that the *rurales* have got him? Honey, it's a frame-up. You get hold of Morwyck, dearie! Get hold of him quick! When Brayfield aint here, Mike's the only man who can fix things. Run, dearie! For Gawd's sake get hold of Morwyck!"

Santa Madonna, what a very old story! A moth fluttering into a spider's web to plead for the life of her lover! Morwyck was waiting; and he laughed!

"You aint talkin' to me," he told her. "Your jail-breaking friend is the bird who advised me last night never to walk on the same side of the street with him again. Well, I'm just sittin' nice and pretty."

"But he did not escape—and he but used the *pisola* to defend—Ah, Dios, I see in your eye that you have done this—"

"You do, huh? Well, you should have seen things a little earlier. Go up to the *cuartel* in the morning and get your blue ribbon; it'll have some pretty red spots on it."

The Border Nightingale closed her eyes, and her fragile body quivered from head to foot. In that brief moment she attained crucifixion. When she again looked at Morwyck, she was as hard and self-possessed as he.

"*Bueno!*" she accepted. "All is over. Now I shall play the game at Mexacana too! Señor John-nay Powell goes in safety across the border before morning. You know why?"

"I'll lay you a thousand he don't."

"Then, señor, you lose, because tonight I wrap Don Tostado around my leetle finger, and in the morning I go 'way with him, and for love of me, he do just what I say! Does he not own the Jefe Politico? Has he not been robbed by you? *Bueno!*" Her voice rose to a shriek. "Harm but one hair on the head of my *querido*, and the woman who goes away with Don Tostado will make him close up Mexacana, and send you to the wall!"

O-ho! The little moth had become a tarantula! Morwyck blinked.

"No use us trying to cut each other's throats," he grunted. "I told you once that we were all down here for the money. When you talk a language I can understand, I'm willing to string along. You take care of Tostado; I'll take care of your friend."

"You—I do not trust," she answered. "Tostado himself shall obtain the release, and it is to be remembered by you that if anything happens afterwards, you still pay!"

"What about your contract at the Pigeon?"

Her lips curled ironically. "Is not Don Tostado a *muy gran* *caballero*?" she mimicked. "He pay for everything."

"Fair enough," said Morwyck. "But if you take my tip, you'll get busy damn quick!"

WHEN Mexacana gets something for nothing, it is a celebration indeed. Don Tostado's *baile* that night was a most memorable occasion. The dancing started at eleven o'clock. Behold a temporary bar, stretching the length of the floor, with shirt-sleeved, perspiring attendants serving free liquor to all! Behold an orchestra, imported from San Rey, blowing brass and pounding drums for the delight of strangers and townsfolk!

"Cost much, but what I care?" said the Señor. "*Viva* the Nightingale! *Viva la diabla bonita!* *Vamos*, everybody! When the morning come, Don Tostado go 'way wiz the *prima señorita* of the worl'. Ees it not so, leetle dove? *Por cierto!* At the Casa Cruz I have already arrange breakfast. Me, I am mos' happy and not yet ver' drunk. Flower of my heart, we dance again!"

"It shall be ever as thou sayest," said little Dolores. "Thou art indeed a *galanteador* who is irresistible, and I am thy slave. Out of the goodness of thy heart, though, thou wilt see that no harm befalls the young Americano who give me ribbons?"

"Have I not said so? Ver' good. It ees already done. *Santita mia*, you shall send back the *cinta* you now wear, to your frien' and say zat Don Tostado have tell him to go 'way. Me, I buy ninety-seven more ribbon—all different, and each more beautiful zan other one. Then I put one t'ousan' diamonds on each leetle finger. Me, I'm bes' dam' *caballero* in worl'!"

*Válgame Dios!* A nightingale paired with a fat cockatoo, and dancing to the will of a spider! The hours flew by on the wings of revelry.... Dawn brought the first flush to purple mountain-tops. Juan Cabrillo, secretary to the Jefe Politico, presented himself at the *cuartel*. He had notes both from His Excellency, who was indisposed, and from Señor Morwyck, who was also drunk. It was all a mistake about the Americano.

"*Bueno!*"

The matter had been adjusted; he was to go free.

"*Bueno!*"

The secretary had a note from her who was the lady of Don Tostado's choice—also a hair-ribbon; the Americano would understand.

"*Bueno!*" again! Who cares?

So, at the hour which is usually selected for removing a man from the *cuartel* to a spot against the adobe wall,—out three feet so there will be no stain,—they liberated Johnny Powell and handed him a note from Señorita Romero, accompanied by a hair-ribbon that was not as beautiful as the one in his pocket. The message was this:

Señor Powell:

I return thy ribbon that thou mayst understand there is nothing any longer between us. Señor Tostado, who is very rich and honorable, is to take me away, and this morning I go with him joyfully. Because of his goodness of heart, he has interceded in thy behalf, but thou art to cross to thine own country at once and never return.

I who am most proud and happy advise thee to think no more of—

Dolores Romero.

Does a man who knows all the whims of the Ivory God cry out when the turn of

## Gerald Beaumont

has written for the next—the February—issue of this magazine a prize-fight story unlike any other from his pen. You cannot afford to miss—

"Two Bells for Pegasus"



the dice is against him? Johnny Powell had been led forth expecting a dozen bullets; this was not much different—merely another case of false dice.

He fingered the satin bow, and was about to toss it aside as beyond his comprehension, when sensitive fingers, trained to detect the slightest irregularity in an ivory cube, felt the crinkle of paper under the center knot of the ribbon. He stuffed the bow carelessly into his coat pocket.

"Make a nice little souvenir," he said to the secretary. "Tiene cigarillo?"

The secretary proffered cigarette and a match. He sighed profoundly and observed:

"Women—zey are what you call the bunk. I too, one time, have been jilt. Caramba, yes!"

"Right," said Johnny. "I suppose you're going to stick around, and see that I vamoose muy pronto?"

The other shrugged apologetically. "It ees quite possible. His Excellency would prefer that you not return to the hotel, and so I have myself collect your money at Señor Brayfield's. It ees here. We ride south to Ayala, and there you may cross."

Johnny pocketed a roll of currency, and followed his guide to where horses were waiting.

"You're some little master of ceremonies," he acknowledged. "Lead on!"

THEY rode slowly along the trail that winds east and then south from Mexicana. Twenty feet past a jutting rock that hid them from view of the *cuartel* on the hill, Johnny Powell leaned forward in the saddle, and his right fist caught Juan Cabrillo just behind the ear. The secretary to his Excellency slumped off sideways, one foot catching in the stirrup. His head struck the road. In another moment he would have been dragged to destruction, but Brayfield's gamekeeper seized the bridle of the startled horse, and then liberated the foot of the unconscious rider. The secretary sprawled face downward in the dust. Forth from Johnny Powell's pocket came his lady's ribbon. Under the knot was a second note. His eyes deciphered the lines written hurriedly in pencil!

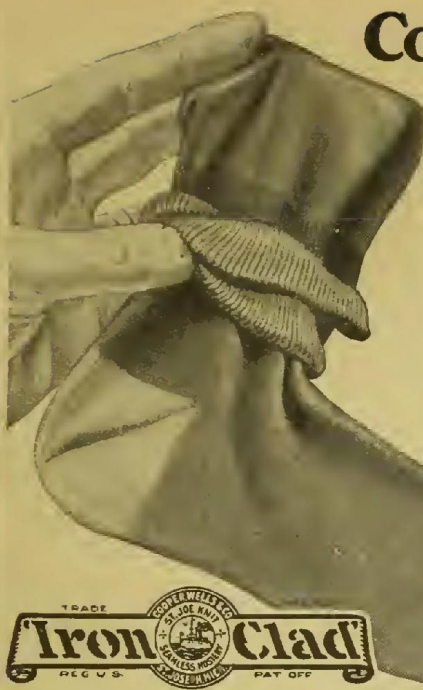
*Querido Mio:*

*Thy kiss is still warm on my lips—how can I go to my death, knowing thou wilt think me false? Tostado is old and ugly, and a most terrible monster. But the price was thy life, beloved—and gladly therefore do I pay.*

*In my bosom there is poison that I have got from La Belle Hélène. This will I take when thou hast reached safety. Go quickly and carefully, dear one—for my heart aches with fear lest they still attempt harm. Go, and in the days to come (may they be many, amor mio), think sometimes of the little one who is no more.*

*Adios—  
Dolores.*

Gambler though he was, Johnny Powell's control crumpled. Juan Cabrillo was coming back to life. Brayfield's gamekeeper flung himself on the secretary. He slapped, and shook, and clawed the man out of his stupor, found a gun and jammed it into Cabrillo's ribs—pulled



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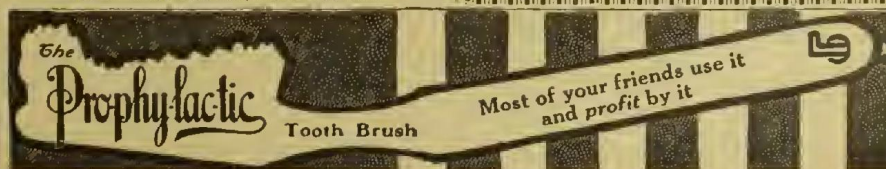
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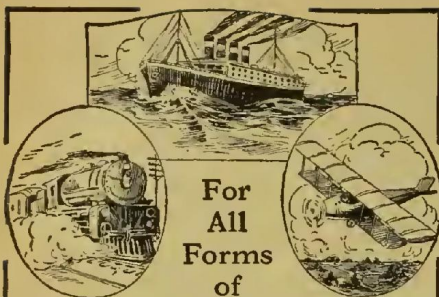
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the whole wretched story out of him in gasps.

"At the Casa Cruz," shuddered his victim, "on the Camino San Miguel. Si, si—they are to breakfast there. God's mercy, señor, do not kill!"

Flung bodily into the mesquite, Cabrillo lapsed again into coma. A moment later his horse, cut across the flank with a rawhide, galloped off over the mesa. Johnny Powell regained his own saddle, wheeled and struck off toward Casa Cruz. Never had any man seen on the face of Brayfield's young game-keeper an expression like that!

You comprehend that the Casa Cruz was a *posada*, an inn that lay southwest from Mexacana and but a stone's throw from Mission San Miguel. It is not more than an hour's hard ride. Legend and custom have made San Miguel a Gretna Green for lovers. There is a well into which one throws *centavos* that every wish may come true. Padre Fernandez performs the very same ceremony by which he once united Don Sebastian Aquilar to Teresa Pico, who waited for him twenty years in the garden where as children they had planted the rosebush. That, as all men know, is a most admirable classic. But it was not in Don Tostado's mind to visit the padre. When one is a *gran' caballero* of many loves, one bothers not with ceremonies; they are for children.

WHERE the road curves away from San Miguel, and the white 'dobe walls of Casa Cruz welcome the traveler, Johnny Powell flung himself off a wind-blown horse. In the courtyard a dozen of Don Tostado's *soldados* sprawled on benches after the manner of men who have left a long night behind, only to face a still longer day. They recognized him for a young Americano whom they had last seen in the Mexacana *cuartel*, but he had a drawn revolver in his hand, and they made no move until he had disappeared through the doorway of the Casa itself. Then they closed the heavy gates, and flocked toward the *patio*.

Ay! Ay! What chance has one man against fifty? *Ninguno!* Can a young gringo with a single *pistola* kidnap Don Tostado's *chiquita* when there are five rifles to say no? The attempt is not to be recommended, señor.

Once more the dice rolled against Johnny Powell. He was standing in the doorway of the dining-room, Juan Cabrillo's revolver trained on a fat cockatoo, and his left hand beckoning to the spell-bound Señorita Romero. Johnny should have known better than to stand in a doorway. Dolores shrieked a warning, but it was too late. Behind the young American, José Garcia, proprietor of the Casa Cruz, appeared suddenly with a heavy wine-bottle. He brought it down with compelling force on the head of Johnny Powell, and Johnny crumpled up.

When he came to himself, Dolores was kneeling by his side in the courtyard, and they were surrounded by a wall of Tostado's men.

"Querido mio," whispered a voice, "I had so hoped to save thee! Thou shouldst have gone. But ah, beloved, I understand!"

He nodded dully, and struggled to his feet, swaying like a drunken man.

He put a protecting arm around the Border Nightingale and steadied himself. In front of them stood Señor Tostado, holding in his fat hands a blue hair-ribbon, and two notes that had been taken from the captive's pocket. The Señor's dark eyes were ringed with red. A cockatoo does not like to have his crest sheared away.

"So," he hissed, "it is the gringo that I already save' from being shot, who would interfere some more, eh? And you, señorita—you theenk that I am old and ugly and such a monstair, eh? You try to make the fool of Don Tostado—no? *Nombre de Dios*, I show you a leetle joke, too! With your backs against the wall—both! *Vamos!*"

Johnny Powell's head cleared instantly; but his face went linen white. Tostado's face was inflamed with fury and much liquor.

"Hold on," he pleaded. "She's not in on this. Smear me all over the place if you want. But you let this little girl go. You're a good fellow, *hombre*—you're a big sport, see? You wouldn't shoot a baby just because she did a little kiddin'. She didn't mean—"

DOLORES put a small hand over his mouth. Her eyes were lit with the flame of a Joan of Arc.

"Hush, beloved! Did I not tell thee there was poison in my bosom. *Querido*, it is God's will that we die together; otherwise we but die apart."

She turned to Tostado. "Señor, may I but have the ribbon that is so blue? You will not refuse a last request."

"What I care?" roared the Señor. "Ho-ho! *Válgame Dios*—let your lover tie the ribbon in your hair, and then say good-by with one leetle kees—so! It will be a good play in the theater. Two minute', I ring down the curtain. —*Amigos*, to your guns!"

In the shaded courtyard of the Casa Cruz, Don Tostado's men formed in a compact double file, long-barreled muskets poised obediently. The little Border Nightingale turned to Johnny Powell. Her hands pressed into his the satin symbol of their fragile romance. They are brave little creatures, these Mexacana moths!

"Look you," she instructed, "where the braid begins—nay, but it is simple. *John-nay mio!* Give no thought to him.... We are married, and all is well. With your right hand, so—and then the clasp under and back.... There is a catch, beloved—often have I dreamed of this.... Ah, *bravo!* Thou art admirable! And now tell me, do you love, or no?"

She twisted in his arms, just as though they had been alone in the grape-arbor that borders the Purple Pigeon, and death was not a matter of seconds.

"Girl—oh, girl," said Johnny Powell, "you're braver than I am, and God knows I love you!"

He folded her a little closer, and drew back against the wall. A moment he steeled himself, and then looked at Don Tostado as quietly as he might have contemplated a patron of the gaming-table. Dry lips framed the message:

"Shoot!"

Dolores hid her face against his coat. Johnny Powell's lips caressed her hair. What lovers! What children!



Over the face of Señor Don José Maria Lopez Tostado, who in his own eyes was a very great *caballero* indeed, there passed the look of an artist who stands spell-bound before the work of a rival hand. He continued to contemplate the masterpiece. Somehow he no longer looked like a cockatoo, and his dark eyes reflected first growing incredulity, then profound admiration, and finally the divine light of a heaven-sent idea. He waved a pudgy hand at his *rurales*.

"Go 'way, leetle mens, go 'way. I am a ver' gran' *caballero*. Dios, yes—what a man I am! All by myself I desire to have my revenge."

The ragged firing-squad lowered their weapons and lazily withdrew. Who cares what happens at Mexacana?

The Señor advanced upon the lovers, making odd little clucking noises with his tongue.

"Listen, you naughty leetle ones," he directed. "I have an idea that is much more better. Look you, while it ees unfold. In the stable are two ver' good horses. These you will mount at once. Ovaire there is the road to San Miguel, where the silly leetle padre live' that ride a white burro; and beyond lies the country that is safe for children. Thees shall be the gran' revenge of Señor Don José Maria Lopez Tostado, who ees old and ugly and a monstair, but still the bes' damn' *caballero* in the worl'!"

He drew himself erect and snapped one hand to his *sombrero*.

"Señor, I salute!"

He bowed as low as his waistline would permit.

"Señorita, I kees the hand of the only lady I nevair ween! And now—*adios amigos!* But no! First—ho-ho-ho! I buy one dreengk!"

THE tale is almost told. Far down the West Coast, sandwiched between the new railroad and the very old sea, there is a *ranchita* where of evenings two sit in the moonlight, and figure up the profits from the carloads of tomatoes that go forth in ever-increasing number. Dolores rolls the cigarettes for both, and sings *canciones de amor* in defiance to the mountain lions that sometimes whimper in the cañons.

In the autumn Madam Double-chin came down to visit them, and she is not respectable but very wise. With the diamonds from off her own fingers did she seal the lips of a *rurale* who came across a fat and loathsome thing one morning, huddled among the rocks that border the Mexacana highway.

"Johnny," muses Madam Double-chin, "sooner or later a man gets just what's comin' to him in this world. You remember Sadie—the little blonde with the cough that worked in the restaurant? Morwyck didn't know that was Little Bill's sister. Well, dearie, you can guess what happened. Mike wont never put no red ribbons in the hair of any other girl. Look, dearie, in a spot you could cover with a saucer: six shots, and every one of them—"

"Hush," says Johnny. "Here comes the Missus—"

And Dolores Powell appears, with a smile on her lips, and the brightest of blue ribbons in her hair.

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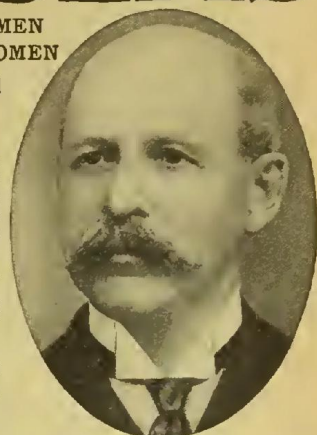
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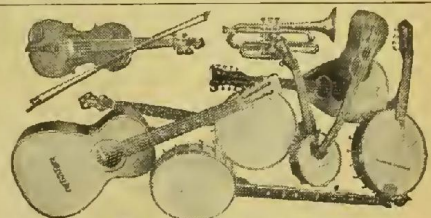
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